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INTERNATIONAL CONCILIATION

Published monthly by the American Association for International Conciliation Entered as secend class matter at New York, N. Y., Postoffice, February 23, 1909, under act of July 16, 1894

WAR AND THE INTERESTS OF LABOR

Reprinted from Atlantic Monthly, March, 1914



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JULY, 1914, No. 80

American Association for International Conciliation Sub-station 84 (407 West 117th Street) New York City

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WAR AND THE INTERESTS OF LABOR

By Alvin S. Johnson

ACCORDING TO LABOR THEORY, THE BURDEN OF WAR RESTS UPON LABOR



AR, to the modern industrial laborer, is stark calamity and nothing more. It is a trade in which the price he pays may include pain of body and anguish of spirit, wounds, disease, and

death, distress to his family and perhaps its dispersal and utter ruin. And the things thus dearly bought, national victory and national aggrandizement, are of no profit to the industrial worker. His private possessions are not increased; his toil is not lightened, his life is not made brighter. War may increase his country's dominions, but the extension of boundaries offers no wider prospect to the worker or to his children. Grant that they participate in the feeling of enlarged personal significance which accompanies national greatness: it is a feeling that does not often kindle a consciousness dulled by toil. The luxury of the large map,—what a thing for a wage-worker to die for!

To the exposition of such a doctrine of war in its relation to labor, thousands and tens of thousands of socialistic writers and lecturers are devoting much of their energies. The doctrine may sound strange to many of us, but among the eight or ten millions of Socialists there can hardly be one to whom it sounds strange, and very few who would consider it false. Although the Socialists are most active in its promulgation, we should be greatly in error if we supposed that it is taught by Socialists alone. Organized labor everywhere hears it repeated, not by revolutionists, but by the most conservative labor leaders. Others may win or lose through war; the laborer can only lose. It is a theory; but it is a theory more widely held and more unreservedly accepted than many other theories which have played an important

part in the history of the world.

Much turns upon the question whether this theory is true or false. For if it is true that, whether his country is victorious or suffers defeat, the laborer necessarily incurs heavy losses and gains nothing at all, we are justified in looking upon the gathering force of the labor parties as a powerful factor making for universal peace. In former times disastrous wars were sometimes fought over trifles; both parties to the conflict in the end laid down their arms exhausted by losses from which they recovered only after generations. Such wars, it would seem, have been possible only in default of an active political party opposed to war. If modern warfare is inevitably disastrous to the workingman, the labor parties of the several powers will furnish such a continuous, organized criticism of policies likely to lead to hostilities that no group of international trouble-makers, however active, can seduce a nation into undertaking a serious war.

In earlier times there have been, it is true, wars of sentiment and of principle, holy wars, race wars, wars of independence, conflicts of competing civilizations. Such wars we may have in the future also. In the case of wars of this character, calculations of cost and gain are beside the point. Racial existence, political freedom, immunity from religious oppression, are values to be won at any cost. There can be no question of the distribution of these values among the several classes in society. Most wars, however, in all ages, have been fought over questions of material interests. Goods and lands, concessions and markets, have been the prizes of victory. These are measurable values, comparable with the costs of winning them. They are capable of distribution among the different social classes. It is the contention of the labor theorists that these values are not as a fact impartially distributed; that the working class gets none of them. Our present task is to determine the validity of this contention.

EARLIER WARS HAVE AFFORDED GAINS TO THE WORKING CLASS

No extended study of history is required to prove that the doctrine of the profitlessness of war to the working class is not valid for all times. From a successful campaign the warrior of antiquity returned well provided with slaves or loaded with booty. The inhabitants of a conquered state and all they possessed. chattels and land, were free prizes, and there is no reason for doubting that the common soldier—the working-class representative—shared in the distribution of such gains. War, to men born in poverty, was a trade, like husbandry or the handicrafts. It was fraught with greater risks than these, but its prizes were far more attractive. In the Middle Ages the looting of captured cities appears frequently to have enriched common soldiers as well as officers. The better share of the winnings fell naturally to the men of higher rank, but no military leader could have retained his popularity without granting even the lowest class of his followers a share in the plunder.

In comparatively recent times, also, the material gains from war have been shared by the common soldier and his class. In our own colonial period, for example, the backwoodsman fought the French and Indians partly for patriotic reasons, but partly also for the sake of the hunting grounds and rich valleys to the westward which should provide him and his children with homes and means of livelihood. The Texan heroes fought no doubt for Anglo-Saxondom and liberty; prospective "headrights" were, however, something also well worth fighting for. A square league of rich land, to be selected in the vast territory cleared of Mexicans—such was the prize that even a private soldier might win.

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THE CHANCE OF WORKING-CLASS GAINS HAS BEEN DE-STROYED BY THE EVOLUTION OF THE PROPERTY CONCEPT

Almost unnoticed, however, a profound change has taken place in the institutions regulating the conduct of wars. In the last two hundred years the concept of private property has undergone a notable extension and intensification. The lands of the world which are fit for homes of men of the expanding races are almost all private property—the private property of civilized men. And gradually the idea has become fixed in the modern consciousness that such property is to be held inviolable, even through con-The clearing of a conquered province of its inhabitants, and the distribution of the land among the soldiers of the victorious army, is now unthinkable. Movable goods are still liable to seizure, under the laws of war; but on land they are not, in fact, seized without compensation, except in so far as they may be regarded as instrumentalities of war. When Germany wrested Alsace-Lorraine from France, the German soldier gained neither land nor loot. On the sea, since 1854, the enemy's goods under a neutral flag have been exempt from seizure; and the public opinion of the world is almost ripe for the establishment of the general principle that private property at sea must be held inviolate.

There is only one way for a citizen of the conquering nation to secure land or chattels within the borders of a conquered province: to buy it. And this he could have done as well without the costs of conquest. For the same social process which established the inviolability of private property has erected into almost universal law the freedom of migration and freedom in the buying and selling of goods. Before the Franco-Prussian war German citizens were privileged to migrate to Alsace-Lorraine and acquire property there; they have no greater privileges now. Capitalism, or the social order dominated by the property

concept, has practically removed struggles for land and goods from the field of international conflict. Under our existing economic system there is nothing to prevent a race from steadily extending its actual borders. The Irish are free to win back the whole soil of Ireland, if they can develop a superiority to English landholders in industry, thrift, and perhaps craft. Slavs may advance upon the Teutons unchecked by military force, provided that they are economically the better race. In the United States we accept as a matter of course the supplanting of the original Anglo-Saxon population by Germans, Slavs, Hungarians or All the prejudices created by wide differ-Italians. ences in race and in culture are required to arouse us to action against the conquest of land by the process of infiltration of population.

Public property is still subject to seizure by a conquering nation; but such property is seldom of a character to yield profit even to the state; it never yields rewards to the common soldier. Indemnities may be levied; and these, theoretically, may benefit the common soldier and his class through relief of taxation. The benefits from indemnities, however, are intangible, and it would be difficult to produce instances of men enlisting in the army for the purpose of securing them.

COLONIAL ENTERPRISE UNPROFITABLE TO LABOR

There is no material interest of the working class that can be furthered by the conquest of a state in the same stage of civilization, but are there not profits to be gained through the subjugation of states in a different cultural stage? The partition of Africa and the scramble for position in China indicate that statesmen believe that their respective nations have, as a whole, much to gain from the control of such states. Has the working class, as such, anything to gain?

The land in the greater part of Asia, and in a considerable part of Africa, is already private property; native titles would hardly be disturbed upon the assumption of control by a colonizing power. The land

not now occupied is desert or swamp or jungle, and is inaccessible to members of the working class. The building of railways, the exploiting of forests and mines, offer valuable opportunities to some of the citizens of the ruling nation, but these are not members of the working class. The flotation of a company to construct a railway in a Chinese province may yield large profits to its promoters. The enterprise may offer attractive investments to capitalists. The business class will be drawn upon to provide managers, the professional class to provide engineers. The road will be constructed, however, with native labor, and native labor, chiefly, will be employed in its operation. The services of the working class of the colonizing nation may perhaps be drawn upon for steel and other supplies. But it stands to lose through the draining away of capital which would otherwise have financed a local venture.

Such enterprises, if successful, establish in the imperial nation a class of persons who draw their incomes from the toil of half-enslaved colonials. It is such a class that most accentuates the differences between the men who toil and the men who possess. The magnate with fortune securely invested in colonial railways or rubber or sugar is likely to be a convinced adherent of the doctrine that the employing class is also the ruling class, whose determinations it is treason to oppose. Colonial exploitation, however much it may enrich certain members of the property-holding class, can hardly fail to be a disadvantage, both material and moral, to the working class.

COLONIAL MARKETS ARE NOT WORTH THEIR COST TO

Colonial dominion, it may be urged, carries with it the control of markets; and the workingman, as well as the capitalist, profits from an expanding market. The colonial market may even be an exceptionally profitable one; it is almost certain to be such if an

exclusive commercial policy is pursued by the colonizing nation. The true measure of the value of a branch of trade to the working class is not, however, its lucra-A better measure is its volume. It is of more importance to labor to export a hundred millions' worth of products at an advance of ten per cent. than to export fifty millions at an advance of fifty per cent. The best measure of all is the amount of wages represented by the goods exported; and this amount is likely to be in inverse ratio to the lucrativeness of a branch of trade. Our export of wheat to England is not very lucrative; for every dollar we receive from it, about seventy-five cents has been paid out in wages to the laborers employed in producing and transporting the wheat. Our export of cigarettes to a Chinese province—if we possessed one—would probably be very lucrative; of every dollar received seventy-five cents would represent rent, good-will, business profits and other property income. But our workingmen are interested in exporting, not good-will, but labor "embodied" in goods and paid for. It is therefore not the closed colonial market, where monopoly profits are to be secured, that is most advantageous to the workingman, but the great, open markets of the world where business is conducted on small margins of profit. A working-class commercial policy would concentrate its action upon the latter field, and would look askance at any tendency in the direction of diverting the national capital and enterprise to the former field.

It is not to be denied that some gain may accrue to the laborer from the colonial market, provided that it can be secured without injury to the larger and more advantageous open trade. If even twenty-five per cent. of the price of cigarettes for China represents the wages of labor, this is in itself a gain to the working class. But the nation that sets about to develop a closed market is almost certain to neglect the open markets, if not to place barriers in the way of those who wish to resort to them. All through the eighteenth century the interchange of goods between France

and England was practically prohibited, largely as a result of jealousies originating in the colonial trade. We have no reason to question the justice of Adam Smith's observation that freedom of trade would have been of inestimable advantage to both nations. It certainly would have been worth more to the workingmen of both countries than the colonial trade to which it was sacrificed.

Preoccupation with a closed colonial market is at best a source of inefficiency in a nation's commercial policy. Almost inevitably the exclusion of other nations from a given country's colonial possessions leads to retaliation, and the retaliatory policy never confines itself to colonial affairs. We may exclude Japan from the Philippines by heavy tariffs; Japan may exclude us from Korea and Southern Manchuria by similar means. The matter does not end here : ultimately the direct trade between the United States and Japan, which is far more important to labor than the Philippine or the Korean trade, is impeded by restrictive legislation. On the whole it is doubtful whether a closed colonial trade is ever worth so much to labor as it costs, in terms of open trade alone. If it is necessary to subjugate the colony by arms, the necessity is excessively paid for twice over. And if finally the colony must be defended in a war against a great power, the price labor pays for the share in the venture becomes colossal in its extravagance.

THE TECHNIQUE OF MODERN WARFARE CLOSES THE ROAD TO PROMOTION FOR THE COMMON SOLDIER

Modern warfare offers no increase of wealth to the members of the working class; the acquisition of markets through war is of no value to the workingman. This fact does not, however, preclude the possibility that war may offer a powerful appeal to the working class, and thus command its political support. In past wars there have been brilliant prizes for the brave and fortunate. After the Civil War almost every com-

munity, North or South, had its instances of men who had fought their way up from the ranks to titles of great popular esteem. The war had bestowed upon them distinction through life, such as they could never have gained in times of peace. A brigadier-generalship won by a man of the people was a stimulus to thousands. It is beside the point to say that the prize was not worth the cost incurred by all those who sought it. Actuarial computations of gains and costs have never governed the actions of masses of men, and probably never will. So long as war remained a lottery, offering splendid prizes to some, the mere fact that its blanks were disproportionately numerous was not sufficient to check the spread of war sentiment.

War, however, becomes less and less of a lottery with every advance in its technique. The training needed by a general to-day is highly specialized. That it may be acquired by a man from the ranks in the brief and sanguinary campaigns that characterize twentieth-century warfare is possible, indeed, but only in rare instances. The European nations which prepare seriously for war provide themselves with trained and competent officers for every emergency. these officers, men from the upper and middle classes, who will gain whatever distinction a war may offer. The man who enters the army as a private, at the beginning of a war, will remain a private to the end of the war. The working-class soldier who rises to a position of high command is destined eventually to take his place alongside of the mythical wandering youth, elevated by freak of fortune to a kingship.

THE ROMANCE OF WAR IS YIELDING TO THE ROMANCE OF CIVIL LIFE

Promotion, however, is only a part of the romance of war which lures men of the working class to the colors. Adventure, new scenes, new experiences, how much these have meant to the young men of

restless disposition to whom the environment in which they have been bred seems tame and tedious! Such were the youths who used to run away to sea, or to swear additional years upon themselves in order to be accepted as soldiers. were once numerous enough to form large armies, and the bellicose statesman could always count upon them as eager to fight in any cause. They seem not so much in evidence now; at any rate, we have difficulty in recruiting men enough even for our small army, and our navy is never too fully manned. There is a consensus of opinion among those who urge political measures for the rehabilitation of our merchant shipping that special inducements will be needed to tempt men to enter the sailor's life. And the British mercantile marine is remarkably dependent upon Lascars and other foreign sailors.

What has become of the adventurous youth of earlier generations? They are largely on the railroad, which sends its spurs into every valley, offering a ready means of escape to the young man who finds the rural quiet intolerable. Or they are in some one of the other wandering occupations which have developed to such extraordinary proportions in these days of expanding trade relations. It is no longer necessary to go to war in order to see the world or to

experience life.

And as civil life becomes richer in variety and in romance, war becomes poorer. The military campaign of to-day does not consist, as formerly, of long marches over a strange territory, leisurely sieges, interminable garrisoning of captured cities. The modern campaign is short and sharp; the armies are hurried on fast trains to battle, like cattle to the abattoir. The private soldier's game of life and death is played quickly to its end, and he returns half-dazed to his home, or returns no more. Warfare is becoming mechanical, like a large-scale industry. Its chief distinction is its appalling accident rate. Accident? How does death on the battlefield, nowadays, differ from

death in a mine explosion or a railway collision? Bulgars and Turks may still strive with bayonets and sabres; but Germans and French would meet death

unromantically, at long range.

Like material gain, glory and adventure are rapidly withdrawing themselves from the reach of the common soldier, if they are not already unattainable. Their tradition remains, however, not without potency. In reality men who enlist may be destined to be moved down ingloriously by machine guns; but among the motives which appeal to the imagination of the recruit are atavistic yearnings for the excitement of the hand-to-hand conflict. The Scottish fighting tradition is still alive, although two centuries have passed since Scot and Saxon were reconciled. and since the Lowland kine that were once the spoil of the Scottish clansmen came to be vested with the sanctity of "capitalistic" private property. The warlike tradition, however, cannot forever survive the reality of the personal prize. The statesman of today wisely bases his hopes of military predominance upon universal service. The conscript must serve the purposes of national aggrandizement, since volunteering cannot be relied upon to provide sufficient men for a great war. And with conscription official recognition is given to the fact that war is no longer worth while, from the point of view of the class that furnishes the private soldiers—the working class.

WAR A MORE SERIOUS HARDSHIP TO THE WORKING CLASS THAN FORMERLY

While the gains from war to members of the working class are dwindling to the vanishing point, the costs of war to be borne by labor grow steadily heavier; so at least it is often asserted. If by the costs of war merely the losses and suffering in the field are meant, the assertion is probably not true. The campaigns of the future, to judge from the results of the Russo-Japanese and the Balkan wars, will be

more sanguinary than the campaigns of the past, but war will be less protracted. We shall have no future Seven Years' War, much less a Hundred Years' War. Furthermore, if a greater number of soldiers die in battle than formerly, fewer die from disease. It is also to be borne in mind that losses in battle are distributed more impartially than formerly among all classes; mortality among officers in the Boer and Russo-Japanese wars was at least as heavy as mortality among the common soldiers.

But the costs of war do not rest exclusively upon the soldiers at the front. The working population at home has to bear the burden of war-taxes, the hardships attendant upon commercial and industrial disturbances, and the loss of the services of many of its most productive members. These costs, it would appear, are growing heavier. That this is true of the financial burden of war is matter of common knowledge. That it is true of the other incidents of war also follows naturally from the fact that the moderate state is coming to be prevailingly urban. An urban state is less fitted than a rural state to bear the strain of war.

One hundred years ago only 45 per cent. of the population of England, already a highly developed industrial country, was found in cities and towns. Today the urban population forms a higher percentage than this in Germany (54), and in the United States (46.3). In France the percentage is only slightly less (41). In England to-day 77 per cent. of the population is city-dwelling.

As a consequence of the concentration of population in the cities the economic life of a nation has come to be very delicately balanced. Food, fuel, and materials must be supplied to the cities with the utmost regularity; the products of the city must find an unobstructed outlet; otherwise a crisis is inevitable, with its attendant unemployment and distress. Even were a nation practically self-sufficing, it could hardly engage in a great war without a serious disturbance of its economic balance.

Few modern states, however, are self-sufficing. The United States is perhaps less dependent upon foreign supplies and foreign markets than any other great power. Yet half a million men in the United States earn their living in the production of goods for Great Britain alone. A war with Great Britain would force all these men to seek new fields of employment. A considerable period of time would elapse before the readjustment of industry could be completed. During the process, our whole economic organism would be seriously disturbed in its functioning.

The city-dwellers, as we have seen, already represent a very large percentage of the population of the modern state, and this percentage is everywhere increasing. If we confine our attention to men of military age, we can see at once that the percentage of this class found in the cities must be even greater. Young men, and men in the prime of life, flow steadily to the city; the aged and the very young remain in the country. Accordingly, the great war of the future, if such a war ever occurs, will be fought largely by city industrial workers, drawn to the standards under some form of universal military service law. Not merely those who are without dependents, but those who have wives and children, parents and sisters, relying upon them for support, will be required for national defense.

It has been just as true in the past that a great war has required the enrollment of those who had families dependent upon them. When the head of a rural household, however, enlists in the army, he leaves his family with a roof of their own for shelter and with cleared fields which will afford means of subsistence, although the labor of tillage may fall heavily upon them. The industrial worker possesses, as a rule, neither roof nor means of production. When he is drafted into military service his wife and children must fall back upon employment in the factory or the sweat-shop. And such employment is not to be secured with certainty, especially if war is attended, as

is almost inevitably the case, by commercial disturbances.

It is doubtful whether, in the whole history of the world, the secondary hardships of war ever rested so heavily upon any class as they would rest upon the industrial working class of the present day. The industrial workers live from hand to mouth; war strikes off the hand. Yet there are persons who would have us believe that working-class anti-militarism is merely a surface phenomenon, which would disappear with the first call to arms.

THE FINANCIAL BURDENS OF WAR REST HEAVILY UPON THE WORKING CLASS

An aftermath of war is the heavy addition to the national budget: interest on the war debt and payments on the principal, compensation for property destroyed, and military pensions. There is a belief widely held that this country, at least, is rich enough to accept the financial burden, even of a great war, without serious injury to its people. In an ultimate sense the United States, like all other countries, is poor. It is too poor to meet the obligations that the current formulation of political ethics imposes upon Current political ethics requires the state to free its citizens from the costs of epidemic disease; to segregate from its life-stream the elements carrying mental and moral degeneracy; to educate its children properly so as to bring to light all their hidden resources for work and life. These obligations the state does not meet, or it meets them inadequately; it lacks the means to do more. From the point of view of current political ethics, the modern state is an honest and well-meaning bankrupt, meeting some of its obligations in full, others in part, and repudiating still others altogether. Saddle the state with the additional and preferred lien of a war debt, and its moral obligations to its people will be more sadly neglected than they now are.

It is obviously the common people, the working class, whose interests are most seriously prejudiced by any neglect by the state of its social obligations. It is the working class that suffers most severely from faulty sanitation and inadequate hospital service; from contamination of blood through the presence in society of defective strains. It is the children of the working class whose education is most likely to be neglected, and whose chances in life are consequently impaired. Accordingly it can hardly be denied that there is at least a modicum of truth in the statement that, whoever pays the war taxes, it is upon the workers that the whole burden finally rests.

Occasionally one hears the assertion that war is worth its cost because of the quickening of the national life which follows it. The "national life," of which much of the conscious life of the individual is a part, is no doubt a social product, and is capable of undergoing rapid and profound changes. Were a great war to sweep over the modern world, it would affect in some measure every expression of thought and every manifestation of feeling. Nationally and individually, we should be transformed, perhaps. Possibly we should have a richer literature and art, a more significant social and political life. These, however, are not working-class values, and it is in working-class values that our present interest lies.

WAR DELAYS THE SOLUTION OF THE LABOR PROBLEM

The most significant interest of the working class is involved in the readjustment of the relations of labor and capital. In every industrial state, labor and capital present conflicting economic interests; they present, further, conflicting conceptions of rights and duties. Employer and employee are far from an agreement as to the meaning of a "right to a job," or of a right to a continuous income from invested capital. Of the two systems of asserted rights, that of the employer is the more intelligible to the general

public. It is nothing but a transference to the employment of labor of the principles long accepted as properly regulating the purchase and sale of commodities. The laborer's system of rights is something new in the world, and therefore not readily understood.

The laborer would convince the general public—the ultimate arbiter in this as in other matters—that the labor contract differs materially from other contracts. and should be interpreted in the light of a special tra-Although the public accepts free competition as a satisfactory principle governing the purchase and sale of commodities, the laborer would have the public accept the principle of the closed shop as regulative of the labor contract. An agreement of dealers and producers to raise prices is a conspiracy against the public; an agreement of laborers for the purpose of raising wages is not a conspiracy, according to the advocates of the labor programme. A merchant who should post a clerk at the entrance to a competitor's place of business, to dissuade prospective customers from entering, would very quickly feel the whole weight of the law. The laborer who "pickets" an "unfair" shop, feels that he is quite within his rights, so long as he limits himself to peaceable persuasion. The laborer, evidently, is attempting to introduce a new system of rights. Possibly the system is sound, and conducive to the public welfare. the burden of proof is upon those who introduce new systems.

Of this new system the general public has already accepted some elements. The right to organize is generally granted. The principle of collective bargaining rules in an extensive part of the modern industrial field. The labor contract is being differentiated from other forms of contract; this is already evident. The process is a slow one, however, and makes head only as a result of persistent efforts on the part of the leaders of labor. But persistence alone would accomplish little; the support of the public is essential; and the cause of labor is greatly strength-

ened if the more broad-minded and generous employers regard it sympathetically. If, for example, labor can convince the more liberal employers that an eighthour day is desirable, the public is likely to regard with favor a strike to force other employers also to limit the working day to eight hours. The strike will receive wide popular attention, and, if successful, will be credited with the victory. The preliminary work of preparing the public mind, and winning a certain amount of support among employers, although indispensable, remains unrecorded. Hence the progress of labor is likely to be regarded as the result of a series of struggles between employers and employees. But it is just as truly the outcome of a conflict of prin-

ciples in the social mind.

Peace, domestic and international, is a prerequisite to the working out of this conflict of principles, and to the social validation of the laborer's scheme of rights. A war in progress distracts the public attention; its influence is inevitably reactionary. Further, the conclusion of the war injects into civil life large numbers of men who have been trained to drastic action upon quick judgments. The industrial world is filled with little Alexanders, slashing away with their swords at apparent Gordian knots that civilian patience might have unraveled. Let it be granted that the warlike ex-officer, in the rôle of employer, is no more of a menace to the interests of the working class than is the warlike ex-private in the ranks of labor to the interests of capital. It is none the less the laborer's interest which is most seriously prejudiced by the substitution of the spirit of war for the spirit of peace. The influence of strife and turmoil is reactionary in the end. It strengthens, rather than weakens, the hold upon the social mind of the employer's ethical formulation.

THE LABOR MOVEMENT A GUARANTY OF PEACE

The interests of industrial labor are bound up with peace. Recent historical tendencies, we have seen,

have steadily encroached upon the field of possible gain to labor from war, until that field has practically disappeared. Recent tendencies have also steadily increased the weight of the burdens imposed by war upon labor, until these burdens have become intolerable. The hopes of labor for general social recognition of its claims, and for their realization through appropriate institutions, can prosper only through the spirit of peace. All these things the men of the working class are beginning to realize. They are therefore justified in their claim that the labor movement throughout the world is the best guaranty of peace.

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

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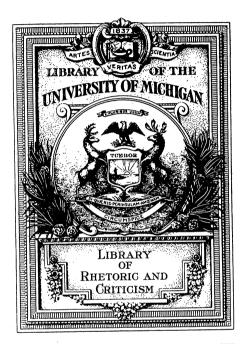
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